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### Out of Sight, Out of Mind

When we attempt to acknowledge racism in the United States we are met with so many views and ideas from people who have had different experiences that it is very hard to get a solid idea as to what the state of racism and discrimination are today. My research this semester however has to do with race in and at the University of Illinois. Specifically my research has covered aspects of behavior, environment, and background of randomly assessed unnamed individuals. Through such means as surveys, analysis, and observation I have begun to draw a picture of how the current generation feels about racism. As well as, how their views have been shaped by the side of history and racism they were taught to see and possibly ignore. Furthermore, It is the intention of this research assignment to engage the reader in a thought process that will give them a better understanding of how many college students feel about the past, present, and future of racism and discrimination at the University of Illinois.

I began my research with observations of the class, the University of Illinois campus, and my fraternity. I used general observations and discussions from class in order to get a feel for the progress of the class in terms of race awareness and writing. My Fraternity served as a great tool in studying behavior related to race and diversity at the University of Illinois. My Fraternity is a very diverse and interesting Fraternity yet there are always stereotypes thrown around all day, everyday. It is almost as if, at my frat,

the more controversial and out of hand suggestions about race you say or explain the funnier you are. This racism can almost get to where it is a competition about who can make up the most controversial comment about racial stereotypes. While I say this I do not believe that my brothers truly mean what they say or rather understand the deep problems with what they say that makes joking about racism unacceptable. However, I will not act as though I or anyone else is perfect. I myself am not innocent of racially stereotyping others and from much observation this year I do not believe any person is completely innocent. To many people it seems as though the joking is “all in good fun” but the fun is stamped out when you start to realize that these racist notions are what tear us apart in the long run as a diverse campus. Through my observations of the stereotypes and racism that I experience at my fraternity and around the University it is my firm belief that the views I see expressed from others have been manipulated and instilled into them since they were born. Which brings us to the question of how and why the views of others are shaped from the time they can comprehend differences in race.

This is where institutional racism comes into play. Institutional racism is a concept that I have become familiar with during this semester which serves to explain the manipulation we are unaware of by the institutions that we go through as humans. Understanding the concept took some time but when I finally did come to understand the concept I have found that it is one of the deepest problems and is literally everywhere when I observe others. It is easy to see from observing the class and attempting to analyze myself, inside of this institutional racism, that we are all deeply affected by institutional racism whether we choose to acknowledge institutional racism or not. I

found that when one stays mindful of institutional racism they can experience racism no matter how subtle, conscious or blatant it is. It is wrong to think that these concepts are just another subject in a class, and that the subject only pertains to ones time in that class. This is because institutional racism is a complex issue that is very hard to understand because it has so many factors that go into it. On top of all of that no one wants to feel guilty for something they do not think they actively participate in, which is rightfully so.

This is what I have found after speaking with many people in casual conversation. I would introduce the concept to them and explain it as best I could and then I would try to gauge their reaction. All were white and their reaction was almost always the same. They felt very uncomfortable about the fact that they could be part of something yet unaware at the same time. Some left in denial but others understood. It seemed as if to some I was going against being white or that I was attacking them in some way. Somehow they saw it as though I was saying they were guilty and should feel bad, which was far from the case. I find the reactions of these individuals ironic and similar in nature to how situations between different races can get so tense and, for lack of a better word, awkward. Such as members of the same racial group standing together at a bus stop or sitting together in cafeterias to avoid such cultural confrontations which neither groups seem to understand why the other acts different or looks different. The individuals who in the end understood or were intrigued with the subject, unsurprisingly to me because I am white too, had the same question, “what are we supposed to do about it though?”. I told them I had no answers that I felt comfortable with either. Clearly institutional racism is one of if not the most prevalent causes of racism and intolerance in the world, The United

States, Illinois, and the University to which we in this class all belong.

The observations I have taken have really shaped my research. I really wanted to draw a literary picture of how from a small child we are shaped into who we are today in terms of what we think of ourselves and others racially. As well as the concept that while institutional racism is to an extent experienced without the person even realizing that their view of others is being manipulated by things they have no control over. To further this I have found that unrealized factors play a role in who we are. Also as individuals we are the only ones that can teach ourselves and in a sense to “fix” the prejudices that have been instilled in all of us regardless of race. The following paragraphs better explain the answer to what we can do to better our knowledge of institutional racism.

In order to get a better sense of how I arrived at the conclusions of my observations I choose to subject some individuals to surveys. With questions such as number four, “Do you believe that racism is institutional in nature? That is, do you learn it involuntarily throughout your life or is it a conscious decision that one makes everyday? Explain why or why not or perhaps another reason.”

The surveys help to reinforce the points above that institutional racism is instilled in us from very young ages. I have always thought that people are products of there environments and that values are relative to culture and spatial relations. And this is no more apparent and true than in the controversy that is racism and discrimination. The surveys, as oppose to my observations, give an alternate view without possible bias of answers from my personal beliefs or opinions that obviously will affect my perception ultimately affecting my observations. That however is the point after all. I am part of this

social experiment as much as the others I have surveyed or observed. I am as much a guinea pig as anyone in order to find a collective connection between a persons background and their view of race in terms of everyday interaction at the University of Illinois. Maybe that is where the confusion stems from in the end, the fact that you cannot have a control when evaluating racism and discrimination. You cannot get an unbiased view and you cannot expect any one person to know the “answer” to racism because as I have continued to find time and time again throughout my research no one has the answer or solution to racism because there is not one. There is no magic cure or button we can push to make it go away no matter how much we want it to or not. Most people I have spoken with would agree to take that magic cure or push that button if they could. For example I am sure we have all experienced racial tension before whether it be at school, the workplace, or at home; the fact is that it makes us uncomfortable and awkward feeling which no one wants to feel. Why then, if there is so much tension awkwardness surrounding racism do we not just stop? The answer is simple, we can’t because racism is instilled in us through the institutions of schools, religions, politics, and community.

Unfortunately it is the case that everyone at the University of Illinois has been brought up in a society that engrains them with racism whether they are Black, White, Indian, Korean, or Latino. It has come to my attention this semester through the news and observation that how racial groups view each other is not always the same in every part of the world which in turn affects institutions such as the University of Illinois. This is because young adults come from all over the world to share in a college experience. Yet

this brings up many social and culture issues such as Indians having a false impression of

African Americans because they believe blonde hair and blue eyes is an ideal look although you do not find any blond haired or blue eyed Indians. This in turn automatically makes them judgmental and ignorant to the fact that no race is better than any other. The following part of my research is a survey that can help one understand the way a typical college student thinks about everyday race related topics at the University of Illinois.

1. Do you experience racism at U of I?

Yes      No

2. Is this racism directed toward you or others?\_

Me      Others

3. Are these events, in your opinion, meant to be hateful or joking in nature or are there both?

Hateful      Joking      Both

4. Do you believe that racism is institutional in nature? That is, do you learn it involuntarily throughout your life or is it a conscious decision that one makes everyday? Explain why or why not or perhaps another reason.

Involuntarily - others may do it around you but you don't actually think about it until you experience either side of it

5. Does U of I as an institution perpetuate racism? For example, by having a predominately black football team and predominately white golf team, is it trying to say that one group of people is better at a particular sport or is it simply coincidence because the best people were picked for the job. Please explain your thoughts.

No, it's not U of I's fault a certain sport is more predominate in one culture than another.

6. Would you be willing to take a writing class that has a theme based on racism at the University of Illinois? Circle one.

Not Willing      Not sure      Willing      Very Willing

7. Would you take the class just to get a grade or to understand and learn about racism at U of I in order to further your own perception and knowledge of racism? Answer briefly.

Grade      Not based on grade

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8. Do you believe that such a class would help to extinguish, or perpetuate the ideas of racism in the minds of college students?

Extinguish      Perpetuate

9. Do you believe that being a certain race affects your perception of your environment at

the University of Illinois as well as your perception of yourself?

Yes      No      (If you would like to comment on this question feel free)

Different races (as a majority) have very different experiences at U of I. This is due to most races keeping to their own (not out of prejudice but difference in culture)

**10.** What race do you consider yourself?

Caucasian

The answers to questions four five and nine were the ones that stuck out to me the most. This is because we often times debated these very subjects during class time this year. The debates in class were always informative and somewhat heated in nature because of the difference in views and background. We had a wide array of diversity in the class which added to the feedback greatly. The fact that the person in the survey answered the questions similarly to us in class leads me to only one conclusion; that is that younger people in general have a consensus amongst themselves about the state of racism today. The individuals in my class had a similar view as an outsider in the class that the best athletes play at the University of Illinois not because of their race but because of their skill. They had a common belief that while Institutional Racism is a touchy and real subject it is still for the most part involuntary. Lastly, the answer to question nine was seemingly a big subject with the class this year. It dealt with the question of whether racism and discrimination are simply a question of comfort. It is easy to understand this, almost too easy, which in turn makes many people think it cannot possibly be the reason for racism and discrimination. It is too simple, right? Well not so fast! I believed “the comfort culprit” was worth further investigation so I began to think

more and more about our racial comfort zones. I remembered an article that we had read at the beginning of the semester which did not specifically reference the concepts of racial comforts zones directly, but did however make me start thinking about the concepts

relevance to my project.

The following article entitled Defining Racism “Can We Talk“ raised a plethora of new ideas about racism. In particular one hypothetical situation from the article really helps to explain and help one visual how and why racism is an institution in this country. The situation can help someone understand how racism has been engrained and “accepted” to a degree in society.

I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway at the airport. Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt. The person engaged in active racist behavior has identified with the ideology of White supremacy and is moving with it. Passive racist behavior equivalent is to standing still on the walkway. No over effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the conveyor belt, see the active racists ahead of them, and choose to turn around, unwilling to go to the same destination as the White supremacists. But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at the speed faster than the conveyor belt-unless they are actively antiracist-they will find themselves carried along with the others.(Tatum, 129)

This article proposes that unless one is actively acting in some way against racism, than they are by default involved in racism because they have been developed by a system that instills racism in them, whether they choose to be racist or not. However, is this always the case? Are people inherently guilty of racism by associating with any institution? In

my personal opinion it is possible but it is becoming more and more clear to me that there is no answer and no one can completely feel they have found the “cure” for racism. All situations are circumstantial by nature, Tatum argues that there is one condition or law when it comes to racism. While I like the hypothetical situation described above and agree



with parts of it, at the same time I am made to wonder if you can judge each situation associated with racism by the same standards.

What I believe would be a better approach instead of Tatum's guilty by association outlook would be to associate people with their comfort zones. I for one am a white male from an old port town on the Mississippi River. Being in Champaign is now a comfort zone just like home was, but it was not always like this for me. Everyone here is, for the most part, from places like Chicago or some other suburb surrounding it. I still do not tell these kids that I am from Southern Illinois or Alton, Illinois. No one knows where Alton is and in turn telling them this takes them out of their comfort zone which, for many kids from Chicago, is that their city is the best that they have a better world view, yet when you simply tell them about a place they do not even know in their own state they get defensive and judge you as rural because you are not from their comfort zone. Now, I simply tell people I am from St. Louis and while to many people at the University St. Louis is still not "as good as Chicago" it makes me feel better that I did not subject them to the awkward feeling that would surround them when they might realize my comfort zone is different than theirs.

Quite simply put people's comfort zones are so fragile how can we ever expect to get straight answers from everyone in order to get a better understanding of racism and

discrimination? The example above while not necessarily pertaining to a racist situation does have a great deal to do with blind judgment and ignorance which is the basis of any prejudice or discrimination. It gives the reader an idea of how simple interaction can impede someone's comfort zone enough to shape their view of a person. The same must be

said for racial comfort zones. I have found through observation and analysis of the article and institutional racism that many people do not form their opinions of others based on what that person does or says, or the “content of their character” if you will, but really they base their decisions on how another persons identity affects their own comfort zone. When you feel uncomfortable you tend to become defensive. This is completely understandable because we as humans have instincts that sometimes overpower our own decisions and defensiveness from the unknown is one of these. However, as humans we like to think of ourselves as better than the beasts among us. What we all need to do is to look around us and see that racism still lingers amongst us in order to realize that we must learn to overcome our instincts to remain in our comfort zone and allow social and cultural issues such as institutional racism and discrimination to be solved without impedance.

Racism and discrimination, in the United States, have come a long way since their infancy in the slave trade, however still after hundreds of years the soiled remnants of our past still lingers to haunt us. I often find myself asking the question, Is it possible to put racism behind us? Is it realistic? The answer to both questions is a resounding yes, it is possible! However, the question to ask ourselves is not whether it is possible to put racism behind us but *should* we. Through the concepts of institutional racism and

comfort zones described above I hope you gained a better understanding of the situation at the University of Illinois and maybe even yourself. The stage has been set to use the history of racism in this country to the only possible good it could be used for, education. We cannot ask to put it behind us or we are doomed to repeat what we have forgotten.

Appendix 1

**Survey**

1. Do you experience racism at U of I?

Yes      No

2. Is this racism directed toward you or others?\_

Me          Others

3. Are these events, in your opinion, meant to be hateful or joking in nature or are there both?

Hateful          Joking          Both

4. Do you believe that racism is institutional in nature? That is, do you learn it involuntarily throughout your life or is it a conscious decision that one makes everyday? Explain why or why not or perhaps another reason.

5. Does U of I as an institution perpetuate racism? For example, by having a predominately black football team and predominately white golf team, is it trying to say that one group of people is better at a particular sport or is it simply coincidence because the best people were picked for the job. Please explain your thoughts.

6. Would you be willing to take a writing class that has a theme based on racism at the University of Illinois? Circle one.

Not Willing      Not sure      Willing      Very Willing

7. Would you take the class just to get a grade or to understand and learn about racism at

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U of I in order to further your own perception and knowledge of racism? Answer briefly.

8. Do you believe that such a class would help to extinguish, or perpetuate the ideas of racism in the minds of college students?

Extinguish                      Perpetuate

9. Do you believe that being a certain race affects your perception of your environment at

the University of Illinois as well as your perception of yourself?

Yes      No      (If you would like to comment on this question feel free)

**10.** What race do you consider yourself?

Work Cited

Tatum, Beverly. “Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?”.

NY: Basic Book, 1997

